

STATEMENT OF
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before the

SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT OF GOVERNMENT MANAGEMENT, THE
FEDERAL WORKFORCE, AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

UNITED STATES SENATE

on

RECRUITMENT IN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

MAY 7, 2009

Chairman Akaka, Senator Voinovich, and Members of the Subcommittee:

I appreciate your giving me the opportunity to share with you my commitment, as the recently confirmed Director of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), to create a dynamic and responsive recruiting strategy and hiring process. During Public Service Recognition Week, as we recognize the outstanding contributions made by Federal employees, we need to also be mindful of the challenges that we face as a Federal Government in recruiting the next generation of employees who will continue to make this Nation strong. As the Director of OPM, I am convinced there is no other priority more important than making the Federal recruiting and hiring process as transparent, efficient, effective, and user-friendly as possible, from the perspective of both job applicants and the Federal agencies that need these critical skills in order to accomplish their missions.

In my short time as OPM Director, I have learned a lot about what OPM has done to move Federal hiring into the 21st century. In concert with several agencies, two of which sit with me here today, we have developed several initiatives that were designed to improve Federal recruitment and hiring. What concerns me, though, is that while these initiatives have received good press and are supported at the highest levels within the human resources community, they have unfortunately not permeated throughout the Federal agencies, or, more importantly, become a standard way of operating. Even within my own agency, I find that sound human resources management practices have not taken hold.

This optional, voluntary approach to driving innovative and bold changes to human resources management is not working. If we are going to make any real progress toward addressing what the American public has requested—an easy-to-use application process that both Federal managers and applicants deserve and a recruiting and hiring process that brings the right talent to the mission – we must engage in an aggressive campaign to mandate the needed innovations. I believe both of you, Senators Akaka and Voinovich, have introduced legislation on this topic and we look forward to reviewing it.

To show you how seriously we have taken your challenge this past year for OPM to take on a leadership role in recruitment and hiring, I want to take the next few minutes to update you on some of our more significant and successful ventures.

- OPM, in collaboration with the Federal Acquisition Institute (FAI), introduced the idea of working as one Federal Government to recruit and hire contract specialists at the entry level. Representatives from the acquisition community, several agencies, and OPM human resources professionals worked together to tackle recruiting and hiring on three fronts:
 - branding and marketing by creating a recruiting Web page that is both informative and interactive;
 - streamlining the application process by trimming job announcements by over 75 percent, writing them in plain language, eliminating written essay-style questions, and simplifying the assessment process so that it takes approximately 15 minutes to complete; and
 - using a centralized hiring approach where appropriate, which offers participating agencies the opportunity to share talent across the Federal Government. Building on this successful venture, at the request of FAI, and in support of the Nation’s economic recovery, OPM has developed and provided to all agencies a complete suite of tools for the agencies to use in recruiting and hiring acquisition professionals at the mid-career level.
- OPM has streamlined job announcements for more than 20 mission-critical and heavily recruited occupations, taking care to again use plain language and remove the requirement for written essay-style questions about the applicant’s knowledge, skills, and abilities (“KSAs”). Some of these job announcements include accountants, auditors, grants management specialists, human resources specialists, patent and trademark examiners, investigators and information technology specialists. Another important improvement was to ensure these announcements focused more generally on applicants’ experience rather than just their **Federal** employment history so that we can attract applicants more broadly from all sectors of society. We cannot continue to rob each other of our talent. We must design tools that seek out and hire talent from all sources. This is the only way we will hire the right people in the right Federal jobs and provide opportunities to Americans, especially in this time of economic need.

Building on some of the initiatives described earlier, and keeping in mind the heightened interest in Federal employment that our current economic challenges have generated, we also are reaching out to those agencies – such as the Army Corps of Engineers and the Defense Contract Management Agency where there is an identified need to fill mission-critical occupations and a recognition that some of these same occupations exist in downsizing industries, such as the automotive industry. Our offer to these agencies is to conduct hiring fairs in Detroit this summer, where we make use of the tools already developed and we pull together as one Federal Government to provide employment opportunities to those with much-needed skills, such as engineers, quality assurance representatives, and contract specialists. Gone are the days of thinking only about how to steal talent from other Federal agencies, and the belief that only those who understand our Federal laws and rules are capable. My challenge to all agencies, mine included, is to seek out opportunities that drive real change in how we recruit and hire. Pulling these three agencies together, albeit with different missions, is an example of how far we can go to not only change the face of human resources management, but also to employ our fellow Americans.

- OPM's Hiring Process Analysis Tool is another example where OPM has provided support to agencies in improving their lengthy and burdensome hiring processes. The Department of Education's Office of Federal Student Aid (FSA), made excellent use of our tool in streamlining their process. They combined our tool with hands-on work interviewing staff members and developing detailed process maps to push forward needed changes. The map consisted of 114 discrete steps, and more than 45 hand-offs between managers, administrative officers, and human resources specialists. The Department has worked to streamline its process.
- Finally, I'd like to introduce my ideas on student hiring. While the numbers are not as dire as some would have you believe, we nonetheless need to do a better job of developing the future Federal workforce. One of our key initiatives that will take place this June is to pull academic leaders together, from the vocational technical level in high schools to the community colleges and universities, and discuss with them our current and future mission-critical occupations, both professional and skilled labor. We need to ensure the academic world clearly understands our needs and helps us build the pipeline of needed knowledge and skills. The answer is not always to create yet another hiring authority. In many cases, it is through good workforce planning, pipeline building, and targeted recruitment that we can overcome some of our most severe shortages. Once we get these talented students on board, we then have an obligation to nurture them through hands-on mentoring programs and paying close attention to their needs and concerns.

As I said previously, I am completely committed to tackling these challenges, both within my own agency and across the Federal Government. I have put together a “tiger team” of

some of our talented human resources professionals to think through and introduce innovative and bold changes to the Federal Government's recruiting strategies and hiring processes. I am convinced we can make bold changes. Some are relatively simple administrative changes, such as writing job announcements in plain language, while others may require legislative changes. But we cannot and will not succeed unless and until we start holding ourselves accountable for changing. Volunteering to change is simply not working. I am, however, very cognizant of the fact that we must first provide products and services that we have reason to believe will work before we cross the line into mandating the changes. Nonetheless, if we don't step off the curb, we will never begin the journey. Change is difficult—I get that. What we can't do, though, is continue to say "we've done enough, and all is fine," when we know it is not and we know we must move forward if we are going to "fix the hiring" once and for all.

There is one more thing I would like to address and that I think is a very important point for me to end this testimony with. No matter what changes we make to recruiting and hiring, we must always ensure that the basic principles of our merit-based system and veterans' preference remain intact. I am absolutely convinced that weakening the merit system is not the answer. As I have said before, not only is it appropriate for the Federal Government, as one of the world's largest employers, to stand up for the principles that ensure fair and open competition and provide our veterans with a chance to further serve their country, but it would be irresponsible of us to do anything less.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to be here today. I would be happy to respond to any questions you may have.